



The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster

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On January 12, 2010, the deadliest earthquake in the history of the Western Hemisphere struck the nation least prepared to handle it. Jonathan M. Katz, the only full-time American news correspondent in Haiti, was inside his house when it buckled along with hundreds of thousands of others. In this visceral, authoritative first-hand account, Katz chronicles the terror of that day, the devastation visited on ordinary Haitians, and how the world reacted to a nation in need.

More than half of American adults gave money for Haiti, part of a monumental response totaling \$16.3 billion in pledges. But three years later the relief effort has foundered. It's most basic promises—to build safer housing for the homeless, alleviate severe poverty, and strengthen Haiti to face future disasters—remain unfulfilled.

The Big Truck That Went By presents a sharp critique of international aid that defies today's conventional wisdom; that the way wealthy countries give aid makes poor countries seem irredeemably hopeless, while trapping millions in cycles of privation and catastrophe. Katz follows the money to uncover startling truths about how good intentions go wrong, and what can be done to make aid "smarter."

With coverage of Bill Clinton, who came to help lead the reconstruction; movie-star aid worker Sean Penn; Wyclef Jean; Haiti's leaders and people alike, Katz weaves a complex, darkly funny, and unexpected portrait of one of the world's most fascinating countries. *The Big Truck That Went By* is not only a definitive account of Haiti's earthquake, but of the world we live in today.

The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster Details

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From Reader Review The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster for online ebook

Molly says

MSM reporter Katz has written a very misleading book, an apology for the latest stage of imperial plunder of and aggression against Haiti disguised as criticism of NGO "incompetence." It's yet another instance of a spokesman for the conquerors of Haiti insisting his paymasters made immense fortunes while plundering and exploiting the citizenry and their resources "by accident", when they really meant -- Katz never offers any evidence for this supposition -- to be benevolent and magnanimous saviours. Oops we blocked the minimum wage! Oops we rigged the election! Oops we tore down the Presidential Palace! Oops we invaded with Marines again! The most damning wikileaks cables - which show unequivocally the malicious US policy including immense pressure on the Brazilian military officers in charge of MINUSTAH (the blue helmet 'peacekeepers' that are actually the puppet military of yet another US occupation of this country) to commit crimes against humanity and carry out massacres of Lavalas supporters and the poor-- are completely ignored while the more ambiguous ones are misrepresented to reduce intent and responsibility of the perpetrators of mass crimes. Katz wilfully ignores the staggering cruelty, indeed the sadism, of the last US invasion of Haiti, when just after the earthquake the US invaded the country and imposed a blockade, obstructing rescue and aid for weeks, refusing entry to rescue teams, to MSF, to other countries' ready to rescue and provide and even to the diaspora who were forced to try to drive in from DR, so that thousands who could have been saved died under rubble and of thirst and injuries, and severely injured Haitians including children were forced to undergo even amputations without anaesthetic. The US invasion and blockade of Haiti post-earthquake is one of the most heinous crimes of our time, and Katz completely whitewashes this well documented, amply filmed, recorded and witnessed history. The book might be useful to some as a collection of references that the reader can investigate herself, but only if it is approached with the total skepticism appropriate to a work of US State Department pr.

Linda says

Jonathan Katz was an AP journalist living in Port au Prince at the time of the earthquake. First hand account of the quake and the two years following the quake. He reports the events of the quake and goes on to follow the vagaries of reconstruction failures and the cholera epidemic. I thought his presentation reflected exceptional access to people and places in Haiti and was further enriched by his previous several years reporting from Hispanola. Enlightening read for anyone who wonders why all those pledged billions have failed to effect any positive change in Haiti.

Doug says

I give this book five stars for its up-close perspective on what happened in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, the tragic ineffectiveness of the substantial amount of money donated (well, "pledged" may be a better word) and the author's willingness to propose changes to the way disaster relief is provided. I am not sure I agree with all the author's prescriptions but they are thought provoking and, given the long-term failure of foreign aid to achieve its objectives, should be considered.

To start with the ending, Katz reports that “today, Haiti is not better off. It ended its year of earthquakes with three new crises: nearly a million people still homeless, political riots fueled by frustration over the stalled reconstruction; and the worst cholera epidemic in recent history, likely caused by the very UN soldiers sent to Haiti to protect its people...”

The tragic details are covered with journalistic efficiency by Katz.

Katz wrestles with how things might have been done differently. He is skeptical of “top-down” efforts at long-term development. He cites noted foreign aid economist William Easterly, who sees two types of development efforts: those led by “Planners,” who think they “already know the answers” (and should therefore direct all spending) and those led by “Searchers,” who “admit [they] don’t know the answers in advance and believe that poverty is a complicated tangle of political, social, historical, institutional and technological factors.” Katz clearly sides with the latter, believing it is better to let the people closest to the situation play a key role.

It is here that Katz takes some debatable positions. He seems to favor funding the Haitian government directly instead of through NGOs or private entities. He mentions the common refrain that “donors refused to fund the government directly, citing concerns about corruption.” But he makes the interesting point that governments may be taking the blame for poor results even when they weren’t in charge of the efforts. Katz provides many examples of how aid expenditures by foreign governments and NGOs are self-serving and misdirected and provide no long-term benefit. People assume, however, that the government was in charge all along and therefore conclude it is corrupt or incompetent or both. This reinforces the unwillingness to give directly to the government. (The fact that foreign governments and NGOs are failing is not evidence the government would do better but it is clear a better way must be found.)

Katz is also skeptical of the long-term value of creating low-wage jobs in the garment industry, which is extremely cost conscious and willing to invest in Haiti. His concern is that “the garment industry would employ Haitians until their increasing ability to produce caused wages to rise, at which point the garment factories would move elsewhere.” And the Haitians would be back to square one. (This does not seem like an accurate view of economics. Wages rise when productivity rises and both the producer and the worker are better off.)

I am not convinced that Katz is correct in his prescriptions, but reading his book does provide convincing evidence that whatever is being done now is not working. It behooves those of us interested in finding effective development mechanisms to hear and discuss all perspectives, particularly those, such as Katz, who have seen firsthand the results of current efforts.

Jan says

This book is excellent. It provides a lot of really interesting information about a disaster that I knew little about (2010 earthquake), a country that I knew even less about (Haiti), and the recovery process that I knew absolutely nothing about. I will warn you that you should be prepared to feel appalled, offended, and depressed on pretty much every level (the international response was just ugh). But also prepare to be educated. By the end, I had renewed faith in the state of modern journalism. For lovers of non-fiction, this is a must-read.

Maggie says

Great read! It is such a compelling story to me- I do earthquake engineering, so I feel like I know this issue from a geology and engineering perspective. But I really have no understanding of how the humans factor in. It was eye-opening to read about the history of the island (I seem to have only learned bits and pieces), the influence of Americans and our particular notable figures like the Clintons and Sean Penn, and especially the world of disaster and humanitarian aid.

I was really impressed with the narrative of Jonathan Katz; he has a very engaging voice and the first-person narrative adds a lot more depth to the story. His experiences make it clear that there are no easy answers or solutions or ways to neatly tie up the disaster into pretty story of American saving the day.

My biggest surprises to learn: disease doesn't necessarily follow disasters (much like violence doesn't either), the impact of the NGA structures to the governance of individual countries, how disaster aid can undermine and put out of business legitimate business owners/suppliers (like the shop keepers and doctors mentioned in this book), how subjective measures of "corruption" are, the difference between disaster aid and development aid (and that the Red Cross is just capable of disaster relief), the story behind the UN cholera epidemic, and just how little power a country like Haiti has over its own affairs and future.

Meg Petersen says

I found this book fascinating and infuriating. It provides a detailed account of Haiti during and after the earthquake and how aid organizations made a bad situation much worse.

I also recommend this article about The Red Cross: <https://www.propublica.org/article/ho...>

The ending of the book is much better than the rest. The account of the cholera epidemic and the ensuing cover-up as well as the presidential election is great.

I was far less interested in the author's personal life. I wish he had left that part out. I was also distracted by his seeming lack of understanding of Evens, his Haitian counterpart, but he never claims to be anything but an outsider/witness/journalist, and never fancies himself a savior, which made this book a much better read than it might have been.

Nancy says

This is one of the best non-fiction books I've read. The author is a journalist who was covering Haiti for the AP at the time of the earthquake in 2010. The house he was living in was destroyed, so he was sharing the experience of many earthquake survivors right after the quake. In the book, he talks about the immediate aftermath but also examines the international response and the way aid money was used - and not used - in the year following the event. He follows the dollars - like the ones I donated to the Red Cross at the time - and demonstrates how very, very little was spent in a way that improved the lives of Haitian people. He also demonstrated the extent to which government aid is tied to the economic interests of the donor countries (like

the plans for the garment factories guaranteed to benefit the U.S. and keep Haitian workers impoverished in low-wage jobs). This book reminds me why I've always admired the profession of journalism so much.

Julie Dawson says

Disclaimer: I received an ARC (Advanced review copy) of this title. My review is reflective of the ARC.

It has been said that the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, and nowhere do we see the truth of this more vividly than in Jonathan M. Katz's *The Big Truck That Went By*. Katz shines a bright, unforgiving light on the bureaucracy, politics, and infighting between NGO's that often do more harm than good over the long term with their emergency response to massive disasters.

The earthquake that devastated Haiti in January, 2010 generated one of the largest and most costly recovery efforts of modern times. And yet millions of donor pledges never made it to the people who needed it most. Pledged money was never released by the governments that promised aid. Donations made to international charities to help Haiti got spent on the charities' normal operating expenses. Unscrupulous businesses cut behind-the-scenes deals to make sure pledged money was used to buy supplies and services from their companies at considerable profit. And all the while, the people of Haiti were left wondering if their own government was stealing all of the alleged money that was promised even though the local government had been stripped of any control during the reconstruction.

The book highlights the piecemeal, often offensively patronizing, way international disaster relief works. By refusing to give money directly to the Haitian government, citing concerns for corruption, donor nations instead force Haiti to submit to an international, third party committee to oversee how the money is spent. Of course, this results in even less transparency and accountability even as the Haitian government takes the blame for the lack of progress. It also shows how things that seem like no-brainers (delivering free medical services and food) actually hurt the local economy (local food suppliers and medical practitioners driven out of business). And how corporations, such as the garment industry, use such disasters as opportunities to take advantage of poorer countries for cheap labor.

Katz spares no one, not even himself as a journalist reporting on the disaster for AP, from scrutiny. There is a distinct undercurrent of raw anger in the narrative. It is an honest, righteous anger that transfers easily to the reader as senseless roadblock after roadblock is thrown up against the reconstruction by various factors all vying to control the situation for their own benefit. More poignantly, we witness the actual struggles of the people of Haiti in intimate detail as they try their best to get along with their lives.

For anyone who wonders why third-world countries continue to struggle after the billions of dollars pledged to them over the decades, this book will open your eyes to the horrors often inflicted in the name of charity.

Les says

I have more compliments than criticism for this book, which is huge considering my fascination with the subject matter - what happens during and after the initial world response to a huge natural disaster in any country, but especially one like Haiti. Despite some issues, I believe this book should be standard reading for people who are considering or are actively involved in post-disaster work. I mean at any level - on the

ground, administratively back home, donating from their iPhone, etc. What works in "The Big Truck That Went By"? The truth of it. Katz is an investigative journalist and when he finds himself in the midst of a story - this story of Haiti after the major earthquake that is really a larger story of its history as a country and in relation to the world - he goes all in. Katz is interested in "big" issues and because he is a human, we're given detailed insight on issues that HE classifies as big. Fortunately, I agree with him for the most part, though giving one to three negligible lines about the rape of women and girls during this particular post-disaster location is where we part ways - perhaps his bias as a man is showing or really his limited scope of experience as one. Still, it is a full and enlightening read. Where does the money go? How is it mishandled? What was the true source of the cholera outbreak months after the earthquake and how irresponsible is the U.N. for attempting to cover its own exposed ass? What "blame" should be attributed to the Haitian government and how is that same government a convenient world scapegoat? All those questions and many more are answered from his perspective combined with facts. The real payoff is actually toward the end of the book, when he delves into the U.N. cover up, the presidential election and a brief, but thought-provoking epilogue. That's the good stuff.

Still, this is very much the work of an outsider - a "blan" with a compassionate but still culturally distanced perspective that his four or five years of living in Haiti only serve to highlight. Katz never states he is anyone other than who he is and is crystal clear about what brought him to Haiti and why he stayed as long as he did after the quake. And it's refreshing to see someone in his role that does not have a savior complex. Yet, like all of us, his self-awareness has limits. This leaps out at various instances and does not compromise the integrity of the book, but does undercut it at critical times. A perfect example is his expectation that a hotel employee will clear away dead bodies (Because isn't that the employee's job while he is a visiting journalist? The answer is no, but he doesn't seem aware of this.). I was the most put off by him using his own personal account to "frame" the book. He didn't need to because the history of Haiti, the damage of the quake, Haitians' experience of it and their reactions to the aftermath are all engrossing enough. I didn't need to know anything about Katz, him finding the love of his life (who - at least as he presented her - came off so standard issue, I'd wish he hadn't mentioned her at all) or why he, like many people who can, took himself back to the comfort of New York. Perhaps he should have written a separate book or account for people who are as interested or more interested in his life than that of those native to and living for a long time in Haiti, because his account of himself was something I had to suffer through to get to the meat of the book. If this were a book for young journalists, then that's helpful and perhaps that was his intent. Maybe he just needed to get it off his chest in an effort to heal but see that's the problem. I didn't pick up this book to read about him - not even 20 pages out of 275. I felt the subject matter needed all of the room.

I'd venture that many readers, especially those of color and/or those who are tired of this framework, felt the same as me or just skipped it entirely. It was an unfortunate juxtaposition to his intriguing account of what this disaster revealed about Haiti that most Haitians already knew, but most of us don't. This sounds harsh because he went through a life-endangering time as well, but I mean - he's a journalist. That's what he came for (not the earthquake of course) and he got his story and now his profit via the book, so it's harsh but still true. Plus, I wouldn't have anything to criticize if he didn't insist on telling me and as I said, he needn't have bothered because the Haitian experience is of much more interest to me than his. Oddly enough, there were also more typos than I've ever seen in a book of this caliber written by a journalist, but they lessened after a certain page (can't remember which one). Even with all this, the eye-rolling moments are worth it. This is an incredible work that raises so many pertinent issues that stem beyond Haiti but are also endemic to the country. In writing about Haiti, he is really writing about the world and highlights our culpability as global citizens in the largely failed response. There are more "post-earthquake Haiti"s out there because of how systems are structured and how we participate. In the end, the book is a warning and it's a damn good one.

Breakingviews says

By Robert Cole

It is three years since a massive earthquake devastated Haiti. A new book by Jonathan Katz suggests that the ensuing international aid effort gave the stricken the Caribbean country all possible assistance, short of actual help. He suggests, indeed, that the outsiders did more harm than good.

Haiti's crisis plucked at the world's heart strings. Bill Clinton, Sean Penn and Angelina Jolie were among the famous names who stepped up as advocates for the dispossessed. Katz reports that \$16.3 billion, much from the United States, was donated. But the effort fell woefully short. "The world came to save Haiti and left behind a disaster", he writes.

The \$16.3 billion promise might sound large, but it pales beside the \$806 billion that Katz says went Iraq's way in military and reconstruction spending up to 2011. It pales, also, against the \$20 billion spent over 10 years maintaining roads and railways in Maryland - a small U.S. state of similar size to Haiti. It is equivalent of \$1,600 per Haitian. That's not nothing. But in the context of the scale of the work required, it is hardly a fortune.

Besides, Katz reckons that the sum was exaggerated. Some pledges remained just that. Some dollops of aid were reallocations of already promised funds. Debt forgiveness - which Katz asserts is aid recognisable only to accountants - was lumped in.

Money was spent outside Haiti giving work to non-Haitian aid professionals. Katz acknowledges the need for such indirect support in the messiness of a disaster relief programme. But fears about corruption impeded the flow of funds to Haiti, while Katz asserts that donors' and aiders' own practices fell short. Non-governmental, governmental, and supra-governmental organisations, says Katz, showed themselves to be inefficient, ineffective, self serving, and short sighted. Katz describes how 7,500 Haitians died in an epidemic of cholera that he says was introduced by Nepalese soldiers acting under the auspices of the United Nations.

Bad luck exacerbated Haiti's historic problems with poor institutions and corrupt leaders. Outsiders also exaggerated the threat that disaster and disease would breed cataclysmic civic disorder. By the same token Katz avoids making the mistake of casting ordinary Haitians as caricature innocents. It is refreshing to see them crowding round fuzzy TV screens enjoying the 2010 Soccer World Cup, for instance. And dancing to "Kompa, that thumping love child of merengue, funk, and R&B..."

His sketch of Marassa, one of the accommodation camps that sprang up in Haiti, is even more revealing. "Under a busy overpass, children were flying kites," he writes, before describing the informal governance structure of the shanty. "New 'camp committees,' heavily male, were rarely elected," says Katz. "The young men had come forward on their own, and no one knew how they would use their power." Yes, there's a shadow of gangster-dom here. But the existence of the committees points to the powerful role that spontaneous initiatives can play in reconstruction or renewal. The financial cost of such enterprise, meanwhile, can be minimal.

Katz survived the quake personally and lived its aftermath as a news reporter. His book has flaws that may stem from a lack of detachment. But by telling the story from the bottom up, Katz shows that money, though useful, is a poor substitute for know-how, empathy, and trust.

Pam says

This is a fascinating and important book on many levels. It is both an entertaining and sometimes suspenseful personal account of living and reporting in Haiti during a series of crises, and an insightful examination of the advantages and pitfalls of foreign aid - both from governments and nonprofits. As someone who lived in Gaza and observed its own version of what Katz describes as the "blan bubble" (like Iraq's Green Zone), so many of the dysfunctions he observed rang true to me. We keep repeating the same mistakes year after year, country after country. When will we learn? Or rather, when will the people we are supposedly helping start refusing our imperialistic, strings-attached "help"?

Jim Marshall says

I wanted to review this book briefly because I think it might have been overlooked when it first came out several years ago. Written by Jonathan Katz, an AP journalist stationed in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, the book chronicles the devastation of the hurricane and earthquake that nearly destroyed Haiti in 2010. The post-disaster images were widely seen of course, as were the famous people showing up in front of cameras to convince us of their sincere support (see Bill Clinton, Bono, Sean Penn, etc.). But what I didn't know, and what I'm not sure most people know, is that less than 10% of the money that was promised to Haiti ever arrived. Even more depressing, most of the money that did arrive went into the pockets of NGO's or other, already established aid groups, some of which were affiliated with the US government. Almost none of the money went to Haitians who could use it to rebuild their country. Because of problems with property records, construction materials, and lack of organization among competing groups there to help, almost no sanitary housing was built, almost no permanent medical infrastructure was developed, and few productive efforts were made to provide employment for the people who lived in Haiti and still live there. Haiti, according to Katz, is no better off today for all the promises and all the unfocused good will that was invested there. It's a depressing story, especially since it can leave you cynical about the nature of the help that follows major disasters.

CD says

Author Jonathan Katz takes no prisoners nor pulls any punches in his extraordinary work on Haiti. Katz was the only full time America journalist living in Haiti at the time of the disastrous 2010 earthquake that was centered beneath the major population center of the country.

Haiti is more than misunderstood and impoverished. It is a lesson in bad intentions, mismanagement, corruption, arrogance, and host of other problems unlike any other place. *Then* there are the Haitians themselves! The International community has done no favors for Haiti for . . . a 100 years! While this should not be news to anyone who has even in passing looked at the overall situation regarding Haiti, there continues to be a view of the country that is based entirely in myth for too many.

Katz should have won every award available for this piece of reporting. Obviously though his politics were not 'quite acceptable'. He is too supportive of the people who most need the support, he is critical of those most deserving of criticism, and he relates facts as opposed to the 'true' story that has been told by the aid

agencies, foreign governments, and for me the most annoying group, celebrities.

Recommend to all. Readers who want to know how wrong good intentions can go only need to crack the cover of this work!

Ben says

The author, Katz, was an AP reporter in Haiti during and after the 2010 earthquake that killed over 100,000 people. This book tells the story of the earthquake and about the next 18 months, through the subsequent presidential election.

The story of the earthquake itself is quite good, and one gets a good feeling for the situation in Haiti, as well as for the life of an AP reporter. However, the book declines in quality toward the end, especially with the author's detailed description of his reporting on a cholera outbreak (which was brought to Haiti by Nepali UN peacekeepers). Katz is obviously very proud of his reporting on the outbreak, but the story is not nearly so interesting as the earthquake, and Katz's reporting is annoyingly repetitive and insistent. (We need a much fuller investigation, he says, because it could be a coincidence that the cholera has the same DNA as the Nepali strain---it could have come from a shipment of food from somewhere else, and maybe the same shipment will go to the US!) But there's no mystery here, and it is obvious where the cholera came from.

One has to be careful reading this book. Katz is a fine reporter, but is incredibly naive about anything outside that expertise. His opinions on development aid, on economics, politics, and on corruption are all mostly wrong, and usually ignore the evidence right in front of him. For example, he heavily criticizes aid organizations for worrying about riots. There were major riots about 11 months after the earthquake, but Katz sees the 11-month delay as evidence that riots should never have been a concern. The spark of those riots? A corrupted election. Katz says the election should have been delayed, despite Haiti's poor record with dictators. Despite this, Katz says that Haiti's reputation for corruption is overblown---even as his long-time Haitian aide and photographer triple-charges him for gas expenses and then effectively steals his personal car. On economics, Katz describes how Southeast Asian countries have developed their economies by starting with textiles production and moving on to higher-value industries as labor costs rise. But then he says that Haiti should not try to go into textile production (or any industry) because if labor costs rise then the factories will leave and Haiti will be back to square one. (Who knows why Haiti can't move up the same as everyone else did.)

Polo Lonergan says

I don't know how to rate this so for now I won't.

There was some interesting information in this book. The author does, at least, touch upon the fact that colonialism and (as Naomi Klein would say) disaster capitalism is not an accident but a deliberate practice. Whether it's foreign governments, NGOs, or fucking Sean Penn it all comes back to the same thing: removing autonomy from a local population with the lie of benevolence to profit from them, whether in money or in some other form of power.

However, he also talks about his love life. Buddy, I don't care.

This is a smart, interesting book with a bundle of problems. It walks the status quo and, buried just underneath that, there's the hint of a bit of a radical soul who hasn't quite unburied himself from colonialism. If I believed that radical soul knew it existed, I would rate this 5 stars.
